

Community Colleges Step Up to Support Foster Care Students

BY TRACY FRIED

Young adults leaving foster care are finding their way to higher education programs in increasing numbers, especially at community colleges. Over the past several years, federal, state, local, and institutional initiatives have provided underserved students with increased financial assistance (public and private) and academic and student support services.

Approximately 7 percent to 13 percent of emancipating foster youth—those who “age out” of the system—enroll in higher education, but fewer than 4 percent of former foster youth go on to earn a college certificate or degree. Educators, policymakers, child welfare professionals, and private foundations have increased their efforts to provide these youth and young adults with information regarding higher education and career training. These efforts focus on encouraging youth and young adults from the foster care system to participate in postsecondary education and to complete their education. Community colleges play a vital role, as the majority of students from foster care who enroll in a postsecondary education or training program do so at their local community college.

“Going to a local community college was the best option for me,” says Justyn, a former foster youth. “The communication between professors and students is great due to the smaller amount of students in classes. Community colleges are a good transition to bigger universities because they give students lots of help and it’s not so



“Going to community college was the best option for me.”
—Justyn, former foster care youth

overwhelming. My community college helped me build confidence that I could be successful.”

A growing number of community colleges are now developing innovative outreach and support approaches to better identify and assist foster care students. These students often present unique and challenging life experiences that require a network of coordinated support services and advocacy. Although service models are customized to reflect the needs of local communities and availability of local resources and services, they share a set of core components, including:

- A dedicated, knowledgeable, trusted point person to coordinate services for youth at the college;
- A focus on foster youth outreach, housing, financial aid (12 months), and mentoring;
- An external program champion to coordinate community and college advocacy; and
- An experienced and influential external catalyst organization to provide advice and guide best practices.

Across the country, several community colleges have developed programs designed to meet the needs of foster care students.

Austin Community College in Texas, for example, serves about 75 students from foster care across its seven campuses. Under the leadership of the vice president of student support and success systems, the program pools the resources of community college staff, local foundations, state and community agencies, independent living programs, and student advisers to provide coordinated support services for foster care students. Each campus designates a program champion to lead the initiative and direct students.

Seattle Central Community College in Washington aims to build a program that emphasizes community outreach and collaboration, case management, program evaluation, and academic/career assessment and planning.

California’s Fullerton College is adapting the Guardian Scholars support

model promoted by the Orangewood Children’s Foundation and the school’s Cadena/Transfer Center. The support staff works with students to promote success through student orientations, advising, mentoring, workshops, and drop-in services targeted to the unique needs of foster care students.

The California Community College System’s Foster Youth Success Initiative (FYSI) launched in February 2007, with more than 85 colleges sending FYSI liaisons to Sacramento for a three-day training session. Each of California’s 109 community colleges now has a designated FYSI liaison. These leaders, along with their Foster Youth Services teams, use an implementation manual and a resource guide to help them understand the challenges faced by youth and to develop a service model to help foster care students access resources and services. The state also is hosting regional community collaborations to enhance local partnership efforts and statewide Web-hosted meetings to

facilitate idea exchanges and share best practices.

These types of services boost student retention and completion by increasing student engagement, strengthening students’ academic skills, focusing on success in the first year of college, and building a strong commitment across academic affairs, student services, and other campus departments.

Students from foster care have been shut out of higher education programs for too long. The many opportunities that community colleges offer to first-generation and underrepresented students also need to reach young adults who come through the foster care system. It might be their only—and certainly their best—chance to escape the daunting challenges that life has presented them, and to enjoy the benefits and privileges afforded by a higher education.

Tracy Fried is an independent consultant that advises colleges on the foster care system.

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